

Town of Needham
Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative Working Group
Minutes for December 7, 2020

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87400034488>

6:00 p.m. A meeting of the Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative working group was convened by chair Marianne Cooley. Ms. Cooley announced this open meeting is being conducted remotely consistent with Governor Baker's Executive Order of March 12, 2020 due to the current state of emergency from the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. She noted all public gatherings have been suspended as advised and directed by the Commonwealth. And, as such, suspending the requirement of the open meeting law to have all meetings in a public, accessible, physical location while encouraging and allowing members of all public bodies to participate remotely. Ms. Cooley stated the meeting will not include public comment and the Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative working group and all attendees are convening by Zoom, as posted on the Town's website identifying how the public may join. All supporting documents used at this meeting are available on the Town's website www.needhamma.gov. Present were Matt Borrelli, Sue Neckes, Natasha Espada, Vivian Hsu, Ramin Abrishamian, Marcus Nelson, Toyin Fayemi, Jen Howard Schroeder, Dennis Zhang, Jay Spencer, and Town Manager Kate Fitzpatrick.

Ms. Cooley asked for a motion to approve the minutes. Mr. Abrishamian made a motion to approve the minutes and Mr. Borrelli seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved 11-0 by roll call vote. Ms. Cooley welcomed back Ms. Lisa Smith-McQueenie, a diversity, equity, and inclusion consultant to follow up on trying to come up with a vision statement for the Town. Ms. Espada asked if this group is a Select Board committee or is this an independent committee? She also wanted to know if there is an overarching plan for this group and if there is a plan for the year and a goal that this group wants to achieve. Ms. Cooley said it is a committee that is charged with making recommendations to the Select Board. She is working with Ms. Fitzpatrick, Ms. King, and Mr. Borrelli to come up with a calendar to achieve the goals that this group has set out to do.

Ms. Smith-McQueenie let the group know that this was the visioning session, part two. She has made significant progress and has the meat of what is needed and now it just needs some seasoning. The agenda for this evening's meeting is to review the task and agreements; desired racial equity vision statement attributes; revised language bank; group exercise; sample statements/drafts; focus areas, and next steps. The group talked about the vision statement for the Town and decided that this groups statement should tie to the Town's vision statement. The group went over the list of Agreements, and then talked about the vision statement for racial equity in Needham and what should be explicitly stated.

Ms. Smith-McQueenie asked for feedback. Mr. Borrelli commented that he would rather see a more general statement, and not one that feels negative. Mr.

Abrishamian thinks it is a pivotal statement and it explains why we need to do a lot of other items on this list. Mr. Spencer said that the point spoke to him the most. He doesn't think all these items will solve everything. He thinks it makes a statement to say that this group is serious in addressing the issue. Ms. Howard said it is strong, but the community is telling us that it is ready for a strong statement. Ms. Espada said that one thing that is discouraging is the acknowledgement. It is important and at times can be discomfoting but that is because we are growing, and if we don't have it, it will invalidate the work we are doing. Ms. Cooley thinks the group should trust the process and work with Ms. Smith-McQueenie. Ms. Neckes asked what are the boundaries? Are we trying to limit this to race or to be more encompassing of other groups? The members agreed that the focus for this particular group should be about race and racial equality.

The group took another look at the language bank. It has grown to include privilege, entitlement, positionality unity, harmony, oneness; implicit bias, intolerance, discrimination, behavior, attitude, anti-racist, belonging, inclusive/inclusion, welcoming, community, diversity, identity, restorative justice, healing, reconciliation, race, racism, and racial equity.

Mr. Borrelli said that if we are going to have a Town-wide statement it is going to start to get political and he would want to watch using words that connote a negative feeling. Ms. Espada feels there should be an education component as she still has implicit biases that she didn't know she had. Dr. Fayemi noted that people who don't want to hear it, will use whatever words make them most comfortable. He really wants people to listen to the statement. Ms. Smith-McQueenie said that maybe they should consider some comment about education. Perhaps the statement should be short and concise that pulls everyone in and then have stronger bullets.

The working group members were tasked with writing a sentence using at least six words from the language bank. Ms. Smith-McQueenie asked how the exercise felt and how each person arrived at the words that they chose. Mr. Spencer said that using words like privilege can be introspective. Ms. Hsu said the words are aspirational in many ways. The words have solid definitions for each of us, and there are a lot of concepts to think about. Ms. Espada expressed that many of the group members are putting themselves in a situation where it is uncomfortable and where uncomfortable conversations are happening. She wants to be sure the things that are said are meaningful, because if not, then nothing will change. She said it isn't easy being in the minority in Needham. She thanked the group for being able to speak in this forum.

The working group viewed sample draft statements and then discussed the pros and cons of each of them. Ms. Smith-McQueenie asked them to think about explicit language and what they want the vision to be. Ms. Cooley noted that Chief Schlitter was present to talk about policing, but due to time constraints asked him to participate in a future meeting so the group could continue its work on the vision. The working group reviewed different versions of a visions statement. The group

felt that the vision that was in paragraph form was strong in language but could be lengthy to read through. Members suggested using wording from the paragraph and changing the format to make it more appealing to read. Ms. Smith-McQueenie then went over some areas of focus that were identified by the group as priorities. These include housing, policing, schools, neighbor interaction, interaction with local businesses, diversity on Town boards and committees, and diversity in Town staff.

The group then viewed samples of values/guiding principles. Ms. Smith-McQueenie encouraged the group to review all the material to help them determine what kind of vision statement to recommend. She said she would want to meet again with Ms. Fitzpatrick, Ms. King, Ms. Cooley, and Mr. Borrelli to talk about next steps and if there is a need for her to continue working with the group. She thanked the group for continued participation and input and asked that they send her the sentences that they came up with. Ms. Cooley thanked Ms. Smith-McQueenie for her time and said they would love to have her continue but need to figure out how to do that. She appreciates everyone's time and efforts.

7:38 p.m.

Motion by Mr. Borrelli that the Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative meeting be adjourned.

Second: Ms. Hsu. Unanimously approved 11-0 by roll call vote.

A list of all documents used at this Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative Working Group meeting is available at:

<https://www.needhamma.gov/4942/Needham-Unite-Against-Racism-Initiative>